

Madison in Montgomery?

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In Madison, Wis., thousands of public employees and their supporters have gathered to protest a plan by Gov. Scott Walker (R) and Republican legislators that would strip them of their collective bargaining rights. Some Democratic lawmakers have left the state, depriving the legislature of the quorum necessary to pass the plan.

This much we know: Members of the Montgomery County Council - uniformly union-loving Democrats, or at least union-tolerating Democrats - will not be fleeing to, say, Howard County anytime soon.

But as in the Badger State, they and County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) are faced with a testy standoff with public employee unions - a battle that's come to a head as policymakers run out of options for dealing with the county's recession-related fiscal problems.

"We are friends of labor, but we are also responsible for the public interest," said Patrick Lacefield, Leggett's spokesman. "And the public interest has got to come first."

For sure, the conversation in Montgomery has little in common with Walker's proposal - county officials don't want to curtail public-sector unions' bargaining rights, just squeeze major concessions out of them. But that's a tall order in a county known for its generosity to its workers, especially its teachers, and union leaders are not shying away from tying their fight to the high-profile national battle.

"We've got another Scott Walker on our hands - 'It's my way or the highway,' " union head Gino Renne said, referring to Leggett. The leader of the Municipal and County Government Employees Organization, representing about 6,000 county workers, spoke from the highway, en route to joining the Madison protests.

Renne hesitated only slightly in drawing parallels, calling the budget dispute "sort of the same thing that's going on in Madison." The difference, he said: "We didn't expect this coming from Democrats, alleged 'friends.' "

But the reality of the county budget situation is sobering. There's an estimated \$300 million gap to close, and the council has few options for raising revenue. The local-option income tax is at the state-mandated limit; raising property taxes, requiring a unanimous council vote, is politically impossible. Cellphone and energy taxes have already been hiked. And in a budget where more than 80 percent of the costs are driven by personnel, it's near impossible to hold workers harmless.

The county asked MCGEO, one of four major county employee unions, to give about \$25 million in concessions for next year's budget, Renne said. That included pay cuts

averaging \$4,000 per worker, he said, and a counteroffer from the union went unanswered. Lacefield declined to discuss the negotiations, as MCGEO and other county unions are in various stages of arbitration.

Leggett will deliver his budget in the coming weeks, which may or may not be affected by the outcome of the arbitration proceedings. But it's the council that gets the last whack, and it has tried to strengthen its political hand by [ordering its policy arm to conduct a fiscal analysis](#), which was completed in December. Solving the county's long-term budget problem, [the report indicates](#), means getting employee pay and benefits under control.

Renne has a different view, calling the report "prelude to a battle." Rather than seeing county workers take pay cuts or pay a larger share of their health benefits or increase contributions to pension plans, union leaders suggest that savings can be reaped in a "top-heavy" management.

In recent weeks, the council has hosted community meetings across the county to present the report's findings. To hear council members tell it, union members flooded the meetings, keeping curious residents from learning the truth about the budget. Renne's view: "They were hoping there would be this public outcry in support of what they're proposing," he said. "What they found is . . . there is no public outcry to balance the budget at the employees' expense."

Council President Valerie Ervin (D), a former union organizer herself, offers some sympathy to the employees. "I know how things can escalate when people feel like their backs are up against the wall and no one is listening to them," she said. But the county's back is up against the wall, too, she said, and lumping Montgomery officials in with Scott Walker isn't helping anyone.

The rising political temperature "is going to be a problem," Ervin said. "We're going to have to make some changes, and hopefully we are going to get through these things without major worker unrest." But as tensions between public employees and elected officials rise nationally, that will make a civil outcome harder to come by in Montgomery County, she warned.

"Hopefully, we'll be able to work through this," she said. "The backdrop of this is now the Wisconsin situation, and the so-called war on workers' rights. It's going to be a big deal."